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Turret envy

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THESIS REPORT

For the Thesis Exhibition:

TURRET ENVY

Submitted to the
Department of Imaging Arts
School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
Rochester Institute of Technology

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

1991

By

Gregory Owen Stanforth

Thesis Board:

Jeff Weiss, Associate Professor, Chair

Martha Leinroth, Assistant Professor

Norman Williams, Professor

TURRET ENVY : GREGORY OWEN STANFORTH

IMAGE-STRUCTURES FROM
THE "TURRET SERIES"

APRIL 27TH, 1991

YOU HAVE MY PERMISSION TO COPY MY SLIDES
FROM MY THESIS REPORT
FROM THIS THESIS SHOW

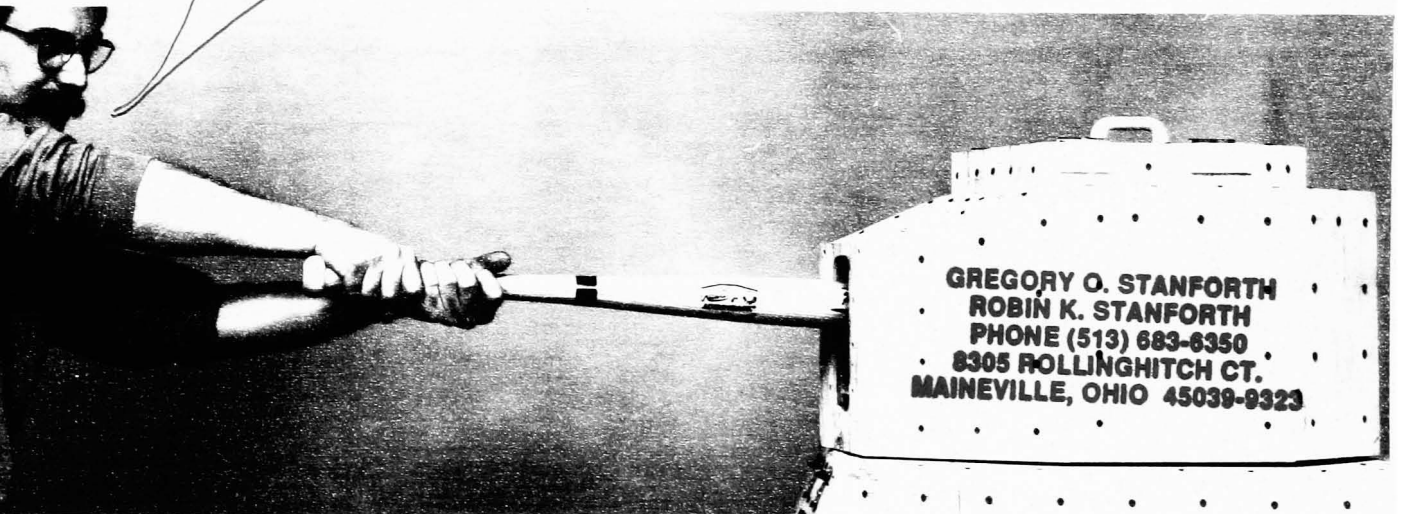


PHOTO: DIMITRI PAPADIMITRIOU

THE ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
PHOTOGRAPHY GALLERY
GANNETT MEMORIAL BUILDING, THIRD FLOOR

OPENING RECEPTION
SATURDAY, APRIL 27TH, 1991
7:00 P.M.

THESIS DEFENSE
TUESDAY, APRIL 30TH, 1991
12:00 - 1:00 P.M.

ARTISTS STATEMENT

Gregory Owen Stanforth

Rochester Institute of Technology

TURRET ENVY

"We moved to Brooklyn, New York, when I was seven and a cousin gave me a box of colored crayons for my birthday. The battleship MAINE had just been blown up by the Spaniards in Cuba, and the papers were full of pictures of this magnificent vessel. I made a careful copy of one with its turrets and guns and colored it with my crayons in a most arbitrary manner, using the whole spectrum at my command."

-Man Ray, Self Portrait

THE TURRET SERIES

The "Turret Series" is a group of image/structures that utilize the turret as a symbol, aesthetic object, and an object of personal interest. The turret, in its many configurations, has been used in warfare beginning with the ironclad MONITOR in the U.S. Civil War and currently with the ABRAMS battle tank. The turret is also an interesting and appealing sculptural object. I am, and have been since childhood, quite enamored of turrets in most any form. Their

size, movement, shape and potential for power make them very seductive. But I have never been interested in them for their intended purpose as machinery of war and destruction.

I believe I share my conflict with a great deal of society. The objects in this exhibition address that conflict.

April 27, 1991

Contained in this Thesis Exhibition were four main works of art: Act I:First Turret, The Turret in Entertainment, Battlewagon and a 2-D piece I Wish I'd Sunk the Bismarck. Also included in the show were various working drawings specifically related to the above mentioned work; drawings of past work presently unavailable; work not deemed suitable for the exhibition space; and reprints of old family "snapshot" photographs from my youth. I would like to include in this Thesis Report not only an exposition concerning the above mentioned work, but also an exploration of the evolution of this body of work in relation to my background, influences and development as an artist.

I. BACKGROUND

I was surprised and pleased upon initial interaction with faculty and other graduates in the Imaging Arts program with the diversity of opinion and experience in the arts. I must admit to a preconceived notion that I would be guided toward a particular "Fine Art Photo" direction. Instead, I am pleased to report there was a recognition, encouragement, and acceptance of my strengths not even completely recognized by myself. Although the criticism has been at times intense and combative, and I am sure I seemed sometimes defensive or at odds with opposing points of view, I could always recognize and appreciate the helpful intent.

With this initial encouragement I began the struggle

between idea and material. The ideas are the most difficult. Once I discovered my particular propensity and fluency toward materials -the acquisition of a vehicle- the battle was half over. Deciding what ideas were important enough to spend the required time, energy, and finances took no thought, just courage. I am sure that most artists feel as I do that the ideas which move and delight them are foolish and trite to everyone else. But we stick our necks out anyway, hopeful that the world will recognize what only we sometimes see.

At this particular juncture I placed a restriction, or as I saw it, a challenge, upon myself and my work. I would try to combine photography and sculpture in all of my work. I must admit to being influenced by three things: first, my own enjoyment and experience with both mediums; second, a greater exposure to contemporary practice by faculty; and third, a slight self conscious intimidation by my surroundings. It is not easy to be making sculpture in the only graduate program of the world's largest photography school. I am no longer bound to this restriction, but I doubt, because of my first reason, that I will ever abandon either mode of expression.

The ideas that I finally decided to execute were derived from a small body of work begun and left incomplete during a two year period prior to arriving in Rochester. After the birth of my son, Greg, I became more concerned and aware of the condition and kind of world in which he would

live. I was not pleased. Reflecting on my own childhood and past experiences, particularly in the military, and watching him at play inspired me to begin building the "War Toy" series. This is where the "conflict" mentioned in my Artists Statement began.

The conflict- this unresolved tension or love/hate relationship, between what I see as harmless children (boys in particular) playing with war toys (guns and other periphenalia), and the potentially harmful real hardware that I was involved with during the VietNam War- is the basis of my work. The argument still goes on about children's toy guns. But the conflict goes deeper for me. The issue extends to national and international politics; both the military-industrial complex and the economics of domination versus social concerns. Not that my work is specifically about all of these issues, but these are concerns from which I derive a departure point. I must also admit to a more personal conflict. I love the appearance of these military machine look-alikes I make. But the experience in my adult years of the negative aspects of this hardware has led me to feel somewhat guilty about my attraction. I think that it is important that this conflict show in the work.

II. THE WORK

A.) The "War Toys" Series

The evolution of the works shown in the exhibition began about three years prior to my entering the program in Imaging Arts at R.I.T. I previously mentioned the unfinished "War Toy" series. These two works (slides 1., 2.) evolved from a desire to create structures (as opposed to forms) that were responses to my feelings about war and my reaction to the military build-up of the Reagan/Bush era. I wanted to show the structure of representative hardware to uncover or expose. This autopsy was a definite reference to the Russian constructivists sculptors and other revolutionary based and anti-establishment movements of the 20th century. I needed to explore the importance of structure. By contrast, my education in Modern art stressed form. Only the anti-art-artists or architects considered structure to be as essential as form.

I consider the Wing Structure (slide 1.) to be a 3-D sketch. An experiment. A formal rendering in space. It is intended to be mounted on a wall, projecting out from the wall -wing like- at eye level, to be walked around or under. The effect is austere and ever changing.

The second piece of the series, the Fuselage Structure, (slide 2.) is less austere and includes a movable component, the turret. The structure is derived from a World War II era bomber. No specific plane intended. Just a representative "type." I became intimately familiar with the type during my tour of duty at the Naval Weapons Center Air Facility, China Lake, California, 1969-70, where a

sizable "graveyard" of WWII era B-29s were in retirement. From time to time on some salvage errand, I toured the remains inside and out. I was initially struck with the large amounts of plywood used in the planes interior and the use of aluminumized canvas for the control surfaces (rudders, ailerons etc.) of this mighty "Fortress" of the first atomic bombs. I was disenchanted: another romantic notion of youth lain to rest. What a perfect symbol this plane was, a gleaming facade of invincibility actually composed of plywood and paint. Real life continues to be more surreal than surrealism.

In spite of the revelations that knowledge and experience bring in adult life, the fascination of youth continues. I still find myself very attracted to these machines. They are very seductive in their shapes, movements and potential to extend influence. I decided to express this childlike fascination by maintaining a scale relative to a young boy of 7-9 years old. The Fuselage Structure was designed to accommodate a four foot tall youth. The structure would be a limited and partially implied enclosure 3'x3'x6' with the turret introducing interactivity. The turret moves 360 degrees while the pair of guns move up and down at the operator's pleasure.

B.) The "Turret" Series

The "Turret" Series is an extension and further

development of the "War Toys" Series. It is also a combination of mediums and concepts dealt with in the time between the two series, mainly photographic techniques. The "Turret" Series began after completion of the untitled piece (Slides 3.,4.,5.) completed during my first quarter at R.I.T. It was mainly a technical and formal exercise, another experimental 3-D sketch to make a self evaluation of combining mediums that I had never before mixed. The first three pieces of the turret series were all completed during the winter quarter of 1989-90. Although each derived from a different idea, I did impose some general restrictions. Each piece would somehow combine a form of photography with a sculptural technique with which I was, up to that point, unfamiliar. Overriding the technical considerations would be the use a turret form as a conspicuous motif. This particular object was chosen as a symbol because of my personal experience in the military and with the "War Toy" series. I felt the turret to be an appropriate metaphor to represent the people, organizations, and government agencies that control, abuse and dominate the less empowered.

1.) ACT I: FIRST TURRET

The first piece completed in the "Turret" Series is ACT I: FIRST TURRET. I wanted to honor former president Ronald Reagan with an insult. This piece is the culmination of that desire. Reagan has become, with history, more and more a symbol of the excess greed and narrow minded reactionary ideology of the 1980's. "Trickle Down" never did. It only

fueled the stupidity and insensitivity that caused the current recession. One specific example of this stupidity that offends me was his recalling into active service the full complement of the obsolete but beautiful IOWA class battleships. At this writing, two of the four have already been returned to inactivity or "mothballs." The cost for this process of in and out and back into mothballs for one battleship alone, the U.S.S NEW JERSEY (according to the U.S Naval Institute) exceeded 372 Million of our 1982 tax dollars. I will not elaborate on the good sense or implications of that expenditure except to say that it was part of the motivation for my turret series.

ACT I, FIRST TURRET (slide 6.) was, in addition to the above, initiated because of two specific incidents. The first was the occurrence of the Naval Review in New York harbor during the Centennial Celebration of the Statue of Liberty, where then President Reagan proudly reviewed the ships of the navies of the world while standing atop a triple 16" gun turret of the battleship IOWA. His symbolic intent is undeniable. Why not a much newer and truly modern aircraft carrier or a Trident nuclear submarine? Why a ship that, although beautiful, long, fast, sleek and conventionally powerful, was obsolete when it was built? Why a ship of another era? In retrospect it has become increasingly obvious that Reagan resented the present and especially the future. To him, the past was exceedingly better. The battleship was for him the only choice.

The second incident also took place on board the IOWA: the now infamous explosion, which killed scores of sailors inside the same turret that Reagan stood in front of so proudly. Because of his vanity and sense of nostalgia, I hold Reagan at least indirectly responsible for these lives lost, through having directed the IOWAs into active service.

The structure of ACT I, FIRST TURRET is constructed of a plywood framework laminated with a Louan plywood stained and urethane finished. Six brass handles are screwed onto the sides suggesting a coffin. The center fluorescent light is a "black light" bulb unlike the outside two which contain "normal" bulbs. The clear plastic frame contains a color Xerox image appropriated from the July 14, 1986 issue of NEWSWEEK.

The entire piece is intended to be perceived as an unusual "post-modern" coffee table with a family picture on top - the Reagan family coffee table. But the turret which that coffee table represents became a coffin for 45 sailors. The black light represents the gun where the accident occurred.

2. THE TURRET IN ENTERTAINMENT

The Turret in Entertainment (slides 7., 8., 9., 10.) the chronological second piece in the exhibition, evolved from the idea of creating some sort of shooting gallery situation. I constructed the turret section first, leaving the specifics of the targets until the turret part was complete. This piece underwent considerable criticism

during many parts of its unfinished stages. Ultimately, this piece was exhibited as an interactive installation. The original "targets" would become video screens to be viewed, possibly, from inside the turret. The four screens would be situated in an arc that could be viewed by turning two mechanisms inside the turret, one to raise or lower the gun's viewer and the other to turn the entire turret left or right. The structure of the turret was constructed of 5/8" plywood that was glued and screwed together. The outside surface was originally to be aluminum. Sections of aluminum sheets were fitted and rejected because of the softness of the material. Louan plywood was finally chosen. The plywood was more compatible with the framework structure. I could glue and nail it to the frame. It could be bent easily and painted any color. The finish on the plywood consisted of two coats of primer/ sealer, each sanded, two coats of brushed on aluminum paint, and finally two coats of clear glossy polyurethane. The aluminum paint by itself was too silvery. Oddly enough, when the urethane was applied it killed the silvery quality but gave it a more painted metal look, somewhat idealized with the gloss. The guns, made of PVC sewer pipe, received two coats of spray silver paint and two coats of urethane. The black cloth, attached to the gun ports, was cut and sewn to size and taped to the guns and velcro fastened to the turret. The viewer is a simple periscope device. Two parallel mirrors are mounted in a plywood enclosure at a 45 degree angle to the view/viewer.

The inside light is a standard fluorescent fixture with a safelight red/amber gell taped over the diffuser.

The images viewed on the video screens are portions of two popular culture productions. The black and white film is from the 1936 film Born to Dance and features Buddy Ebsen and Eleanor Powell. The Image of Eleanor Powell saluting under the guns compared with the image of Reagan used in ACT I, FIRST TURRET is, I believe, interesting. The color video is from a contemporary music video produced for Cher for her album Heart of Stone. The song performed is If I Could Turn Back Time. The effect of the installation is supposed to be one of playfulness and frivolity, song and dance, sensuality and movement all with a military backdrop, consistent with the "conflict" that underlies all of my work.

3.) BATTLEWAGON

Chronologically, the third piece constructed for the exhibition is BATTLEWAGON (slides 11., 12. 13.). This a very simple piece actually conceived four years prior for the "War Toys" series, but somewhat modified. The original concept was to build a version of the tanks I made as a boy with my friends out of cardboard boxes and a baseball bat, pieced together and mounted on a red wagon.

This updated version would be what I really would have liked to build had I better skills, tools, and materials, yet retaining only the baseball bat and red wagon. The idea was updated to emphasize the conflict element discussed

earlier. What appear to be black rivets on the white stained plywood surface of the tank are in actuality the heads of 3" very sharp, drywall screws. Despite the playful and toylike exterior, no parent would like to see his child attempt to play inside. The analogy to the military and war is obvious. To a young person, all of the trappings and regalia of the military look great, but once he gets into it, things are quite different.

4.) I WISH I'D SUNK THE BISMARCK?/I SANK THE BISMARCK

The final piece to be discussed in this report is a drawing/photo-collage. I wanted to create a flat work for a poster for the show that would represent the ideas I had been working with in all of the pieces of the show. When it was finished I decided that it was a good drawing but not right for the poster. Although it illustrates the turret of the Turret in Entertainment in exploded view, it is more than that. I Wish I'd Sunk the Bismarck?/ I Sank the Bismarck (slide 14.) is a pastel, pencil, ink, prismacolor pencil and marker drawing on Rives BFK paper with a photo of the Admiral of the British Naval force that sank the infamous German battleship Bismarck. He is pictured on the forecastle deck under the 14" guns of the British battleship H.M.S. King George V. The drawing is actually two drawings. The use of photography and one point perspective rendering represents the world of popularly conceived reality of the military/war and all of its glory and regalia. This image is lain over the flat mechanical rendering of one of my

turret/toys representing the world of ideas, play and imagination. Together with the printed titles they reinforce the conflict which is intended to be at least implied in all of the work.

CONCLUSION

The works of this exhibition "Turret Envy", the "Turret" series have undergone extensive critique and evaluation by me, my peers, faculty, friends and learned guests. Ideas and objects were submitted to review, exhibition, and class and personal discussion. They were subjected to a vast array of criteria, and these works are the result. In consideration of the strengths and weakness of myself, my peers, the faculty and my situation, I am very pleased and consider this endeavor to be very successful though not without stress, pain and disappointment. The true test of success, though, still lies ahead. With what this experience has supplied me, I expect it to serve me well for the remainder of my career as an artist.

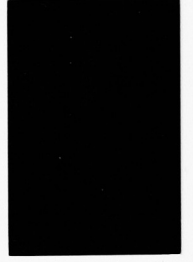
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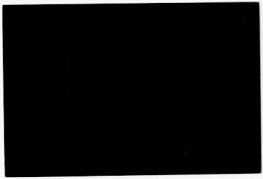
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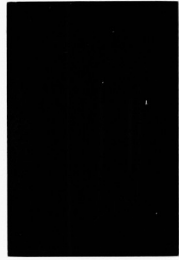
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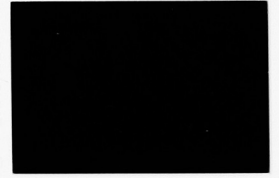
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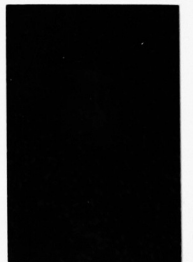
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GREGORY O. STANFORTH

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